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Seizing on consumers' concerns about higher gasoline prices as the summer driving season nears, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) on Monday called for federal legislation aimed at everything from requiring increased fuel efficiency for cars to extending a tax credit for those who buy hybrid vehicles.

But although Kirk said Congress needs to act now to ensure lower gas prices in the future, he admitted that any federal changes likely won't have an effect at the pump anytime soon.

"At this stage, to be realistic, the congressional action can only help in the medium and long term," said Kirk. "For us right now, I don't think the congressional legislation can affect the price of gas tomorrow."

As of Monday, the average price for a gallon of self-serve regular unleaded gasoline in the Chicago area was about \$2.38, according to AAA-Chicago Motor Club. Some predictions put prices at \$3 a gallon by summer.

Kirk has co-sponsored legislation that would reduce the number of gasoline varieties, so-called "boutique fuels," which, under federal and state regulations, can be sold in only certain parts of the country. That situation creates local monopolies that charge higher gas prices in places such as Chicago, Kirk said.

Eventually, Kirk said, he would like to see the federal government move toward one standard for cleaner-burning gas that would create more market flexibility.

Three other bills before Congress would expand the number of oil refineries in the U.S., which have dwindled over the years from more than 350 to 153; require more fuel-efficient cars; and continue the \$2,000 tax credit for consumers who purchase hybrid cars.

Kirk was joined at the news conference, held at Knauz Autopark in Lake Bluff, by officials from General Motors Corp. and Argonne National Laboratory, who promoted alternative fuels and the environmental benefits of hybrid cars.

Argonne researchers want to increase the durability and reduce the cost of fuel-cell technology, said Jim Miller, associate director of the chemical technologies division.

"We see a vision for hydrogen fuel in the future, coupled with fuel-cell technology that will lead to major, major increases in fuel economy as well as environmental and economic benefits," Miller said.

Meanwhile, Lake Bluff officials announced they plan to use \$800,000 in federal funds for an engineering study that will help them begin work on the tricky intersection of U.S. Highway 41 and Illinois Highway 176, which offers no easy entrances or exits.

The intersection and U.S. 41, a primary north-south corridor in northern Illinois, are critical to the local economy, said Village President-elect Christine Letchinger.